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Order of Canada Recipients

Passion for the North Recognized

July 1, 2010 at 1:24 pm. Nuuk, Greenland. For the last four days, Inuit from Canada, Russia, Greenland and Alaska assemble in Greenland's capital for the 11th General Assembly of the Inuit Circumpolar Council. During an intermission in the official proceedings, the paths of two participants cross. Their encounter lasts a brief seven minutes. Neither of them knows who the other person is. Not a single word is exchanged. Yet, for both, this moment becomes one of the highlights of their presence in Nuuk. Luckily, one of them has immortalized their chance encounter with his camera.

A year and a half later, on December 30, 2011, these photographs take a totally different significance when His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston, Governor General of Canada, announces that both individuals are being appointed to the Order of Canada. Both are being recognized for their contributions to Canada's North, its people, its culture: a passion they share. Who are they? How did their encounter come about?



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Aaju Peter

Aaju was born in northern Greenland. In her early 20s, when both Inuktitut and English were foreign languages to her, she emigrated to Canada to follow a young hunter who had won her heart. In her new home in Iqaluit she quickly learned both languages and rediscovered the Inuit culture she had lost. Obviously Aaju developed a passion for her culture and took every opportunity she could to learn about its history, its traditions, and its language. But when Aaju sets her mind on something, she doesn't only do it partially!

Aaju did not only learn English and Inuktitut, she became an interpreter and translator.



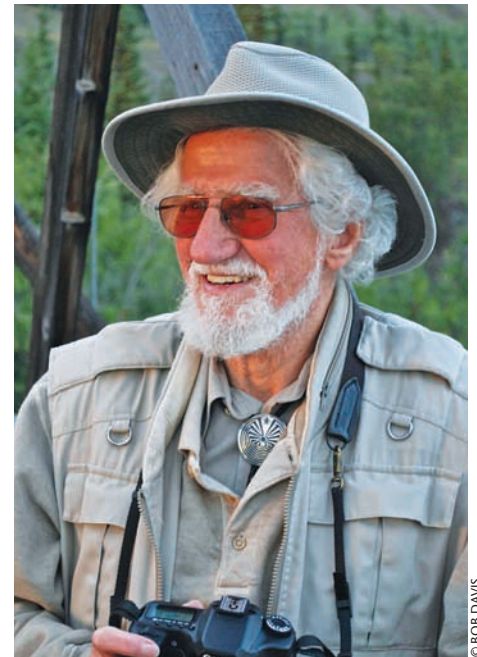
Aaju did not only learn the techniques to make centuries-old sealskin clothes, she became a designer of contemporary clothes that are inspired by traditional Inuit designs.

Aaju did not only learn Inuit songs, she became an accomplished musician and a recorded performer and songwriter.

Aaju did not only hear about the beautiful ancient tradition of *tunniit* (facial tattoos), she participated in interviewing elders and documenting this once forbidden and almost forgotten tradition. Then, in August 2009, she was one of five Inuit women who allowed this ancient art live again by having their faces and hands tattooed. She did it for the younger generation, to show her pride for her culture, to take ownership of an art that was once part of Inuit identity.

Aaju did not only read about social and cultural issues in Nunavut, she embraced the seal-hunting heritage. To ensure that Inuit concerns about the European ban on the trade of seal products are addressed and voiced, she became an activist and obtained her degree in international law. For years now, she has been protesting, lobbying, speaking and publishing articles on the importance of sealing for Inuit livelihood and culture. In 2011, Aaju was the recipient of the Bernard Cahill Memorial Award, given by the Fur Institute of Canada to recognize the promotion of respect for people, animals and the environment.

Oh! Did I mention Aaju did all of that while raising a family of five children.



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Hans-Ludwig Blohm

Born in Germany to a father who was an accomplished amateur photographer, Hans's passion for photography was sparked at a very young age. At 25, as he was hitchhiking through Lapland, he crossed the Arctic Circle for the first time. Little did he know that the next time he would set foot in the Arctic would be 25 years later accompanied by his teenage daughter! During that period, Hans obtained his Master Carpenter credentials, immigrated to Canada, married and established his family in Ottawa. As he was about to turn 40, time had come for his passion, photography, to become his profession. From rural school photographer to darkroom technician, from freelance cameraman to operating a wire service and partner in a photography business, Hans's skills, versatility and reputation have continually grown. In 1966, he branched out on his own.

Looking back at the great variety of his work, Hans admits that "from tiniest microchips to huge murals, from small stamps to very large internationally running exhibits, from aerials to architectural, from books and photo-journalism to informal portraits and scientific subjects, from travel and advertising to the people of the North in their great country, all filled me with great joy and I keep on learning".

The aspect of his work that moved him most and brought him most pride and recognition is his time spent up in the Arctic. For more than 30 years, he has been travelling across the Arctic in all seasons and under all conditions,

capturing its beauty, its history and its spirit. Elder gatherings, Inuit inmates in penal/halfway institutions, milestone events leading up to the establishment of Nunavut, highway construction, to name just a few, are all events immortalized by Hans's lens. His book *The Voices of the Natives: The Canadian North and Alaska*, which includes essays from Northerners along with a selection of his photographs, is a testimony of his love and respect for the land and its people.

As Peter Ilniq, then Commissioner of Nunavut, summarized it so well in a 2001 letter, "Hans is a true 'Ambassador'. He is our voice in southern Canada and the world. He has also become a good friend of us Northerners — we trust him."

Paths Cross

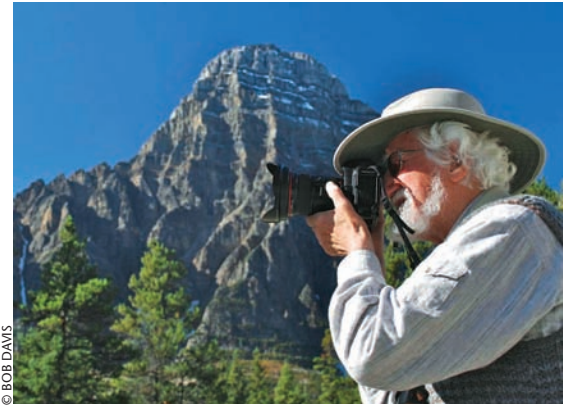
Now, back in Nuuk, Greenland, July 1, 2010. Early afternoon. The official conference procedures are underway. In the centre of the u-shape conference installation, where all delegates can see it, the traditional qulliq is burning. Aaju is sitting in the audience when she notices that the qulliq needs to be tended to. Unfortunately, she cannot interrupt the conference. Her anxiety level goes up one notch and she starts asking around for someone to go tend it. The president of Greenland who lit it earlier in the day is not available and no one present knows how to do it. She has no choice but must do it herself. But first, out of respect for the Inuit culture and the qulliq itself, she needs to put on a traditional outfit. Luckily, it is also time for a recess in the proceedings. As soon as she can, Aaju walks towards the qulliq, takes the tending stick and proceeds with the traditional gestures of

making the flame more contained. At the same time, she sings a traditional song reminding us all how we need to care for the environment and how important wildlife and seal are. Without their fat, the qulliq could not be lit.


"I felt intimidated because it was not my place to tend the lamp as I had not been invited to do so. But, at the same time, I felt honoured to have received the call to tend the lamp. It is such a fundamental part of our culture," Aaju remembers.

Shortly after Aaju finishes her song, Hans walks by. With his trained eye always on the lookout for a special moment to immortalize, Hans notices her. Over the last four days, he has photographed and has been by the qulliq at various occasions. "But this time, I noticed something totally different happening and it fascinated me! I moved right in, close to get some shots of the very interesting human being whom I didn't know who she was nor where she came from. But what fascinated me was her personality, the tattoos on her and the way she responded to me. I feel sometimes I was perhaps a bit too pushy but I saw some possibilities and she reacted to me. This is why we have the reflections of her hands in the oil. I had to move freely and I'm not afraid to do that under those circumstances and I'm very happy about it," he recalls.

The photo session goes rather swiftly as Hans does not want to be in the way of other photographers nor does he want to interfere in any way with the procedure of the conference. All communications between the two of them is done through their eyes. Seven minutes later, they part but both quickly inquire who the



other person is. Aaju knew of Hans but she had no clue he was the person standing in front of her a few minutes ago. As soon as he returns home in Ottawa, Hans hurries to send some of the photos to Aaju. She is delighted and feels honoured that Hans felt compelled to take photos of that very meaningful moment for her.

In hindsight, Hans immensely regrets not having taken the opportunity to speak with Aaju. Undoubtedly, when their paths cross once again at Rideau Hall, they will have much to say to one another. This ceremony will also bear a very special meaning for Hans who was one of the few accredited photographers to attend the very first Order of Canada ceremony on November 24, 1967. Congratulations Aaju! Congratulations Hans! May your paths cross again many more times! 

France Rivet

France Rivet lives in Gatineau, QC. She loves sharing her passion for the North through her photos, writings and presentations. You can follow her adventures and see more of her work at polarhorizons.com.

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